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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000002

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/30/2014

TAGS: [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: TURKISH FUEL TRUCKS ROLLING AGAIN, BUT HEADACHES
REMAIN

REF: A. ADANA 174

[1](#)B. ANKARA 6675

[1](#)C. ANKARA 7141

Classified By: Acting DCM Gerri O'Brien for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The second strike of Turkish truckers delivering fuel to Iraq ended December 26. Fuel loadings at Turkish ports and trucks entering Iraq have resumed at full speed. Although the drivers received higher payments, most trucker complaints remain unaddressed and the bottlenecks at the Turkey-Iraq border will continue to restrict the efficiency of the supply operation and irritate drivers. Turkey and Iraq held a bilateral meeting to follow up on items agreed at the November 30 talks in Ankara. Turkish officials look forward to the second trilateral (U.S.-Iraq-Turkey) meeting on trucker security. End Summary.

Trucks Rolling

[1](#)2. (U) As reported ref a, the wildcat strike ended over the weekend (December 24-26), with truckers lining up at fuel depots in the Turkish ports of Mersin and Iskenderun to load their trucks. The volume of trucks reaching the border jumped sharply, with the backlog waiting to cross into Iraq building from almost zero December 25 to 3,600 on December [1](#)30. Customs officials at the border have responded by boosting southbound processing, which reached over 1,700 trucks on December 29. The number of SOMO trucks that crossed the border and departed in convoys for deliveries in Iraq reached 539 on December 29, 20% above SOMO's average daily requirement.

[1](#)3. (SBU) This strike was similar to the November 2003 strike. It was a wildcat strike, organized without prior warning to the Turkish contractors and organized by a loose coalition of small trucking companies and clan leaders. However, the 2003 strike was resolved in three days, largely as a result of U.S. interest in resolving the problem quickly, as all the contracts were USG-funded. This time, the Turkish companies working for SOMO were willing to wait out the strike. The strikers were surprised to find that there was no "rush" to convoke negotiations once the wildcat strike commenced. The Turkish contractors knew the drivers well and calculated that they would soon run out of money and would be willing to settle for smaller concessions.

The job is not done...

[1](#)4. (SBU) Now that the faucet is turned back on from southern Turkey, the challenge shifts east to the bottleneck at the Habur gate. Border officials are processing southbound trucks at a record pace and the convoys are being formed and dispatched quickly for deliveries in Iraq. The near-term problem will be the return trip to Turkey. Processing of trucks northbound has been a long-standing problem. Even with a three-week strike of SOMO drivers, the backlog of trucks waiting to cross the border to Turkey was nearly 3,000 on December 29. For most of the strike period, northbound processing averaged about 1,000 trucks per day, well below the 1,500 average needed to avoid long delays for truckers. As noted above, the line southbound dwindled to almost zero during the strike. As the wave of recent strikers returns from their deliveries, they will again face a long wait to return to Turkey and pick up another load. This wait not only aggravates already-frustrated drivers, it translates into a large monetary loss for them. Border delays have averaged about 7 days (2 days southbound and 5 days northbound), reducing the number of roundtrips per month and truckers' income significantly. While this is not a problem for us or SOMO as long as the drivers drive and adequate numbers of trucks are able to load at the ports, the increased frustration makes the drivers more prone to job action.

What are the Problems

[1](#)5. (U) Customs officials on both sides continue to do an adequate job -- under sometimes miserable conditions -- of steadily processing truck traffic. Ankara took steps in 2003 and early 2004 to increase the number of Customs personnel at the border and process 24/7. In addition, Iraqi-Turkish and

U.S. officials responsible for border operations meet weekly to resolve operational issues. This process works fairly well.

16. (SBU) U.S. observers at the border report frequent problems coordinating the flow of trucks from one side to the other. This week, for example, Iraqi officials have not been sending a consistent flow of vehicles across, meaning that Turkish officials are sometimes idle.

17. (C) Turkish officials have repeatedly complained about "arbitrary" fees charged by Iraqi/Kurdish border officials, at one point claiming that they were the single biggest problem. Turkish officials said the fees average about \$300 per truck. However, Turkish trucker groups estimate the average to be about \$125-\$150. It is unclear how large of a problem this is for the drivers and what portion of these fees are legitimate and what portion are bribes. It is also not clear whether the drivers are able to recover the cost of fees from their employers or if this comes out of their own pockets. Probably as important is the degree of uncertainty -- drivers do not know what combination of fees they will be forced to pay on any trip. Finally, the fees, reportedly unique to the border with Turkey, pick at the Turkish hyper-sensitivity about Kurdish officials operating independently in northern Iraq.

18. (C) The most serious problem on the Turkish side is the secondary inspection conducted by the Turkish Jandarma. The GOT remains concerned that the large volume of trucks entering Turkey are a dangerous source for smuggling PKK, Iraqi insurgents or separatist weapons, materials or logistics into Turkey. Accordingly, the Turkish Jandarma conducts a separate search, just outside the Customs yard in Turkey. This is a makeshift operation, which is done single-file and at night is done using flashlights, causing the entire system to back up.

Turkey-Iraq Discussions Continue

19. (U) Iraqi and Turkish officials are meeting this week in Ankara to implement a number of measures agreed to at the November 30 trilateral trucker security meeting (ref b). An MFA official confirmed Turkey's interest in convening soon the next trilateral meeting.

10. (C) Comment: The Turkish truckers' strike underscored the complex array of issues involved with supplying fuel and other sustainment supplies from Turkey to Iraq. In the face of strong domestic criticism, the Turkish government remains committed to this operation, and we are encouraged by their efforts to work with Iraq on achievable steps to improve the situation. From our vantage point, the biggest remaining problems are the Kurdish fees and the Jandarma inspections. We will work on the inspections issue with GOT officials. We defer to Embassy Baghdad on the Kurdish fees issue, and await word on when Iraqi officials plan to have the next trilateral meeting on trucker security. End Comment.

11.(U) Baghdad minimize considered.

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